

THE HISTORY of the DECLINE AND FALL of the ROMAN EMPIRE

Chapter XV

- I. Gibbon establishes the necessity of this knowledge of the origin of Christianity as having an essential place in the history of the Roman Empire.
- II. The inquiry into this subject is difficult for two reasons:
 - A. The material is scanty and suspicious.
 - B. The law of impartiality.
- III. Reasons for the victory of Christianity over the other established religions (according to Gibbon).
 - A. Inflexible and intolerant zeal of the Christians.
 - B. The building up of the "future life" doctrine.
 - C. Miraculous powers of the primitive church.
 - D. Morals of the Christians.
 - E. The union and discipline of the Christians which became a part of Roman Church-State government.
- IV. The first great reason for growth of "Christianity".
 - A. Had a lot of zeal.
 - B. They had a sullen obstinacy and their peculiar rites and unsocial manners set them apart as a different sort of men.
 - C. They faintly disguised their hatred for the rest of humanity.
 - D. Would not associate with the institutions of the other sects.
 - E. Their zeal increased because of the Israelitish trait of stubbornness.
 - F. Hated the paganistic acts.
 - G. Gibbon states that the Jewish religion was fitted for the defence rather than the offence (Christ never took the defence).
 - H. Jewish stipulations.
 1. Not allowed to make marriage covenates with other peoples.
 2. Could not preach the Gospel to, or accept the the Gentiles into their congregation.

3. Thought they were the only heirs to the Covenant.
- I. Jews taught-
1. Circumcision (a requisite).
 2. The strength of the Mosaic law.
 3. The divine authority of Moses and the prophets established as the basis of Christianity.
 4. Water baptism.
- J. Jews expected a King and Conqueror and were not willing to accept the Prophet, Martyr, and Son of God that came.
1. This abolished the sacrifices in the temple. (Dan 9:27).
- K. Gibbon retorts that this does not seem possible since Christ and his disciples taught this same law, even to the minutest details.
- L. Gibbon states that the Jews took great pleasure in imposing their ceremonies upon the Gentiles (Gibbon must hate the Jews with a passion for he is constantly slipping sarcastic digs toward the Jews into the facts).
- M. Due to paganism and persecution pressures a small group of Nazarenes (which were the True Christians) fled to Pella, here the True Church was kept scarcely alive for nearly 60 years.
- N. Marcus was elected as their bishop.
1. "Elected" this shows the infiltration of pagan dogmas.
 2. Under Marcus their union with the Catholic Church was more firmly cemented.
- O. Ebionites.
1. Those who did not follow Marcus were severely persecuted.
 2. This tiny remaining segment was dubbed with the title of "Ebionites".
 3. Within this tiny segment a spark of the True Church must have ekked out an existence.
 4. Gibbon says this group later disappeared completely, about 400 A. D., but God has always kept His Church going so obviously it did not totally disappear.
- P. Gnostics.
1. According to Gibbon the Gnostics (meaning "we know") were the exact opposites of the Ebionites.
 2. They were the intelligentsia of that day, the modern learneds.
 3. The Gnostics were probably the followers of Simon Magus and the founders of the Catholic Church.
 4. Were adverse to the pleasures of the senses.
 5. Disagreed with the Mosaic account of Creation and the fall of man.
 6. In short they concocted their own set of doctrines (Simon Magus style) which covered a broad area to attract all types of people.

7. Later they split up into over fifty different sects, which dispersed over Europe, Asia, Egypt, and Rome.
 8. Arose during Two A.D., flourished during Three A.D., and were suppressed in the Fourth Century.
- Q. Orthodox, Ebionites, and Gnostics were alike in three ways.
1. All were obligated to the Mosaic law.
 2. Were animated by the same exclusive zeal.
 3. All abhorred idolatry—These three things set them apart, and made them alike.
- R. Pages 16-17 shows that Gibbon knew and understood demons and how they work. He knew that demons were fallen angels and that they worked through human devices to achieve their desired ends.
- S. The Christians were constantly plagued with polytheism. This pagan practice was everywhere. Their society reeked with it. The puritanic Christians tried to avoid it, but it was impossible for it was everywhere; from the theatre to the circus. It was a constant struggle to remain pure.
- V. The second great reason for the progress of "Christianity".
- A. The "Immortal Soul Doctrine" is the second reason for the progression of Christianity.
 - B. The ancient philosophers had a dim view of the "Immortal Soul Doctrine". They let their imaginations run wild and finally supported it enough that their descendants followed that belief.
 - C. The pagans of Greece and Rome ascertained that the earthly life had nothing to do with the "after life".
 - D. The "Immortal Soul Doctrine" was a big success in Judea, Assyria, Egypt, and Gaul.
 - E. Gibbon states that the Jews had no belief in this doctrine because it was not supported in the "Divine Book". All of their hope laid in the present life.
 - F. The Christians: however, believed that the only hope of a "future life" laid only in the Kingdom of God, which they believed was at hand.
 - G. Many pagans became converts to "Christianity" because of their dread of what might happen to them in the "after life". (Note: when they embraced Christianity they took their previous pagan doctrines and polytheistic ideas with them).
- VI. The third great reason for the progress of Christianity.
- A. Such things as supernatural gifts, such as healing, raising the dead, and the exorcization of demons, were the third reasons for the progression of "Christianity".
 - B. Ireneus was still performing miracles as late as the second century. Gibbon assumes that every Church era

was filled with miracles and great supernatural works.

- C. These miracles were often responsible for the conversion of some wondering pagan.
 - 1. Resurrection from the dead was not a rarity at the end of the Second Century.
 - 2. Gibbon gets his dig in by playing upon the fact that Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, would not resurrect someone to please a certain noble Grecian, who had promised to embrace Christianity if he would. Gibbon calls this a "fair and reasonable challenge."

Note: On the very next page Gibbon has the gall to state thus: "The duty of an historian does not call upon him to interpose his private judgement..." Which Gibbon continually does throughout this chapter.

- D. Gibbon pictures a Christian as:
 - 1. Perpetually trodding on mystic ground,
 - 2. And stretching their minds by believing the most extraordinary events.
 - 3. As being surrounded and continuously assaulted by demons, comforted by visions, instructed by prophecy, and surprisingly delivered from danger, sickness, and from death itself, by supplications of the Church.

VII. The fourth great reason for the progress of "Christianity" was the "Christian's" virtues of:

- A. Repentance from past sins.
- B. Supporting the reputation of the society that they were engaged in.
- C. Gibbon brings out the fact that some of the most well known Christians were repentant atrocious criminals.
 - 1. These sinners could be forgiven by God in His true Church upon repentance.
 - 2. They could not be forgiven by the gods of the temples.
 - 3. These repentant sinners were driven on by the drive for perfection.
 - 4. They were restrained from relapse by the fact that any body which did relapse gained universal and invidious observation.
- D. The Christians were a benefit to the society.
 - 1. Very few had been executed, save for the cause of their religion.
- E. Gibbon divides human nature into two catagories.
 - 1. Love of pleasure: which brings about happiness if refined, improved, and corrected.
 - 2. Love of action: which more often than not leads to wrong doing, but if guided correctly could avail much.

- F. The early "Christians" condemned leasure or luxury in their life on earth because it brought out human nature.
 - 1. They condemned: wigs, garmets of any other color than white, instruments of music, gold or silver vases, soft pillows, shaving the face, or any other attempt to improve the works of the Creator.
- G. This virtue, as with the early Romans, was often guarded by poverty and superstition.
- G. The chastity of the early "Christians" can also be contributed to the virtue of abstinence from all form of pleasure.
- I. The early "Christians" were against war and the government of the world.

VIII. The fifth great cause for the progress of "Christianity".

- A. Through the early Christians were at first devoured by their zeal the sinister drive of human nature, "love of action", was still present. As the first zeal wore off this basic drive strenghtened and finally overpowered the former through government of the Church.
- B. Bishops were set up as presidents of colleges of Proslyters. Church government was established by the setting up of Councils which were linked together for the unification of the Church.
- C. This was the first step to open the door for the Church (Catholic) to firmly establish itself as a higher ruling body, as well as to establish such things as revenue to the Church, excommunication, and public penance.
- D. Because of this new found method of power-Church government- the Church in Rome became the greatest and was able, through missionaries and wars to spread to the world.
- E. The Church tried various methods of gaining revenue.
 - 1. At first they tried the Essenian method. New converts sold all of the physical possessions they owned and gave the money or the possession to the Church. The goods were then evenly distributed among the other members.
 - 2. They thought themselves to be even more righteous than the Jews who were only giving the tenth (tithe) as was commanded by the Mosaic Law as a divine obligation.
 - 3. At the time of Decius the Christians of Rome were very wealthy.

4. Under Alexander Severus the permission was given to individuals to donate land to the Church. By the close of the third century the Church had amassed huge estates.
- F. Distribution of the revenue.
1. Maintenance of the bishops and his clergy.
 2. Expenses of public worship, (mainly the feasts of love, commonly known as agape).
 3. After these two allotments were removed the remainder of the revenue went to the poor, widows, orphans, the lame, the sick, and the aged, as well as to comfort strangers, pilgrims, prisoners, and captives.
 4. It is believed that a multitude of infants were snatched from their Gentile parents and raised in the Catholic Faith at the cost of the public treasure.
- G. Excommunications were exacted for obvious spiritual shortcomings; whereby the excommunicated were cut off from any part of the oblations of the faithful.
1. The excommunicated were cut off by and from the Church.
 2. He was cut off from his private friends.
 3. Excommunication was an act to quell heretics.
- H. This led to the installation of Public Confession, the only act whereby an excommunicated one could be re-admitted to the Church.
- I. Christianity spread in the Roman Empire mainly due to three reasons. They were:
1. Exclusive zeal.
 2. The immediate expectation of another world.
 3. Claim of miracles, the practice of rigid virtue, and the constitution of the primitive church.
- J. The Christians were unwilling to compromise with the enemy it had resolved to vanquish.
- K. The Polytheism foundation was laid upon the unfirm footing of superstition. For this reason it was weak.
- L. Tertullian and Lactantius were responsible for exposing it and contributing to its fall.
- M. The Polytheists were finally converted to the Catholic Faith; however when they went they carried many of their ideas over with them. These ideas were accepted and became a part of Catholic doctrine.
- N. Page 60 gives a brief resumé of Church history beginning with the original Hebrew Gospel.
1. Before Diocletian and Constantine, the faith of Christ had been preached to every province and in all the great cities of the empire.

2. The Church originated in Crete and spread into Antioch.
3. The seven Churches of Asia were immortalized- Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira, Sardus, Laodicea, and Philadelphia. (It is obvious Gibbon does not understand the pattern of these Churches, nor their time sequence).
4. The Church then was spread to Egypt-founded by Hadrin.
5. All types of people, with all types of beliefs, came to Rome, to leave their indellible marks in the religions they joined.
6. At the time of Pliny the estimated number of Christians was 50,000.
7. Faith and persecution was at an all time high during the reign of Antonines.
8. From Egypt the Church went to Rome.
9. From Rome it spread to Gaul, where it was slow and cold to catch on.
10. From cold Gaul it went to Africa where it was readily and zealously accepted.
11. Early Christians were labelled and condemned to obscurity, ignorance, and poverty. There were a few of rank and learning, (Aristides, Justin Martyr, Clemment of Alexandria, Tertullian, Julius Africanus, and Origen).
12. Christianity was rejected mainly by those of high standings.
13. The ending sentences of Chapter XV. seem to be groping into the beginning of the Dark Ages.